

# Building relationships and sharing expertise between the Washington State Department of Health and K-12 school nurses



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CATEGORY: **Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity (ELC)**

The Washington State Department of Health established monthly meetings with school nurses across the state to provide guidance updates and open dialog.



## The “What”

The Washington State Department of Health (WADOH) used Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity for the Prevention and Control of Emerging Infectious Diseases (ELC) funding to establish an Outbreak Response in Non-healthcare Congregate Settings (NHCS) program. Within it, a Guidance & Engagement Unit was established, including a guidance epidemiologist, health services coordinator, K-12 school setting-specific epidemiologist, and an industrial hygienist/infection preventionist. In mid-2021, the NHCS Guidance & Engagement Unit received feedback from the Office of the Superintendent of Public Schools (OSPI) that morale was low among school nurses due to their lack of involvement and interaction with those creating COVID-19 guidance that they were charged with implementing.

WADOH scheduled monthly “School Nurse Connect” meetings to provide guidance updates and open dialog with school nurses across the state who were on the front lines implementing the department’s guidance. Based on a successful model of outreach meetings being conducted with Long Term Care Facilities in Washington State, they implemented the following:

- Scheduled monthly 90-minute meetings where guidance updates were presented, incorporating a minimum of 30 minutes for question-and-answer time.
- All school nurses across the State were invited based on the address list maintained by OSPI.
- OSPI sent monthly meeting reminders as part of their monthly newsletter.



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SUBMITTED JUNE 2023

- The OSPI leader of the School Nurse Corp attended each meeting to assist in facilitating.
- Used the Zoom meeting platform where attendees were able to submit questions (anonymous if preferred). Questions were answered live as time permitted, and written responses to all questions were provided as part of the meeting minutes.
- Every meeting included a panel of Subject Matter Experts available to answer questions on the material presented at the meeting.
- A school nurse mailbox was created where questions, comments, and concerns could be submitted during the period between meetings. Email feedback was addressed at subsequent meetings, and written responses to all questions were provided as part of the meeting minutes. Email feedback was also used to identify educational topics and guest speakers for upcoming meetings.

## The “So What”

Eight (8) meetings were held between August 2021 and April 2022. These meetings generated a lot of interest, as indicated by the following numbers:

- The number of registered attendees for each meeting ranged from 381 to 684.
- The number of attendees for each meeting ranged from 156 to 483.
- The total number of questions received and answered was 563.

Feedback was very positive and provided invaluable insight into the nuances and the difficulty of implementing some of WADOH’s guidance. This collaborative effort was used to effectively draft more usable COVID-19 guidance and establish a connection with school nurses who had previously felt out of the loop and somewhat disenfranchised by WADOH.

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## The “Now What”

The connections established with the School Nurse Connect meeting set the foundation for continuing dialog and interaction. There is now a monthly meeting with the School Nurse Corp, where concerns are brought forward from school nurses directly to WADOH experts on school disease surveillance, infection prevention, and industrial hygiene.

Ongoing needs include funding to maintain WADOH staff experts in school industrial hygiene, infection prevention, disease surveillance, and partnership coordination who have built trust and partnership with critical school partners such as OSPI, local health investigators, and school nurse coalitions.

Key contributors to this project include Rachel Edwards, Washington State Department of Health.